Teaching as a Political Act: Critical Pedagogy in Library Instruction

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Establishing the theoretical framework and reviewing the literature to build a foundation for my engaged pedagogy perspective for library instruction encompasses a number of fields due to the multidisciplinary influence of critical feminist theory, critical race theory, engaged pedagogy, critical library pedagogy, and critical information literacy. Together these ideas create the context and lens to analyze library instruction and how using critical theories and pedagogy could potentially empower our students in evaluation of information and which could be transformed into lifelong learning. Though my framework seems at first to be built upon a number of different and separate (read: disjointed) theories, when examined closely, the common foundation of *critical* analysis is found and they easily merge into a strong base.

Critical (Race) Feminist Theory, Engaged Pedagogy, and Power

A general search for "critical feminist theory" within Google will result in approximately 32,000 results. It is not until halfway through the third page of results that a link to something other than a scholarly article, entry in reference book, or academic essay is found. That first non-scholarly result is an entry from a blog titled "Libraries need a feminist agenda…but which one?" discussing theory and the role of feminism within the field of librarianship. The next non-scholarly result is not found until page 4 where a man has listed critical feminist theory as an interest on his profile page for Plenty of Fish, an online dating site (POF Member o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o). Contrast this with the number of results (430,000) for "feminist theory" where non-scholarly sources are found on the first page and include an in-depth devoted Wikipedia page and a study.com entry for it that provides a definition and overview, videos, and a complete online (brief) course.

Why is this difference important? The difference of results reflects the lack of acceptance and discussion of critical feminist theory within mainstream culture or even its lack of broad acceptance within the academic community. As with critical race theory, of which critical feminist theory (leading to critical race feminism) is founded, the idea of examining society and our ideals in a critical manner, focusing on marginalization, oppression, and the need for change is not wholly incorporated into our philosophy nor even wanted by some (read: elite white men). This is partially due to what some might see as the radical nature of critical feminist theory. It moves beyond a general feminist theory that analyzes gender inequality (of white women) to one that focuses on criticizing not only the misogynistic view of women in society but also feminist theory itself with its inadequate analysis of women of color, lack of action, and limited push for action. Following the tenets of critical race theory, critical feminist theory ensures ideas such as intersectionality—the ways that racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc. "interact to shape the multiple dimensions" (Crenshaw 1991, 1244) of women—are an integral part of analysis. Critical feminist theory incorporates other aspects and tenets of critical race theory, the method of counterstorytelling for example. The practice of speaking back to the oppressive ideology that prevails in our society through storytelling of real lived experiences empowers those in society who are marginalized and frequently silenced. This tool of critical race theory is, as Delgado

explains, not used by accident and "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" (Delgado 1989, 2436). Including these tenets of critical race theory into its own philosophy and analysis marks critical feminist theory in the same revisionist manner.

Critical feminist theory, specifically critical race feminism, is a focused branch of critical race theory—therefore having its beginnings in the field of legal scholarship. However, critical race feminism is just as needed and powerful within other fields; it has been utilized at times in the social sciences. One field where it is vital for its inclusion is education. Within education it can be used to analyze the curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, reform, and gatekeeping (Berry 2009; Childers-McKee & Hytten 2015; Ladson-Billings 1998). Most importantly, using critical race feminist theory for educational equity will "expose racism in education and propose radical solutions for addressing it" (Ladson-Billings 1998, 22).

Foundational reading and theory in engaged pedagogy and critical (race) feminist theory, merged with readings and theory of critical library pedagogy and critical information literacy, compose the combination that forms the theoretical framework for my engaged library pedagogy. The framework highlights how critical feminist theory informs the engaged pedagogical framework used within my specific focus on education within library instruction programs. Critical feminist theory encompasses an array of specific critical theories and different scholars and theorists. When connected to research, this combination forms a feminist standpoint that ensures that scholars are incorporating critical feminist ideals rather than simply adding them onto traditional methods and theories. In her discussion of standpoint feminism, Lorber explicates this principle:

> [I]t is not enough, however, to just add more women to research teams or even to have them lead a team—these women have to have a feminist viewpoint. They have to be critical of mainstream concepts that justify established lines of power, and they should recognize 'facts' can reflect stereotypical values and beliefs about women and men. (Lorber 2009, 131)

Power in the Classroom

A critical analysis of how power exists in the classroom must be built upon the works of Paulo Freire and bell hooks. In her writings, hooks gives credit to Paulo Freire for providing avenues to examine her own thoughts about education and in some ways, give additional power and validity to her ideas (hooks 2010). Freire's thoughts and experiences in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* laid groundwork for her to enact and transform (Freire 2000). The combination and connection between Freire and hooks show a clear call-to-action for an education reform based on a theoretical feminist engaged pedagogy. The importance of including students in their own learning—and in the teacher's learning as well—is a critical part of engaged feminist pedagogy. Without their inclusion, the students become passive recipients of "knowledge" forced upon them. In the traditional way of teaching, the teachers in the classroom have all the power as they are the ones with the information and knowledge and, therefore, the most important (read: powerful) person in the room as well. Both hooks and Freire repeatedly discuss this dynamic of power in the traditional classroom. Without engaged feminist pedagogy, the students are as Freire explains, merely "objects" and are to "comply" and "adapt" to their teachers' demands

(73). There is no room in the classroom for the students to experience their own education, to be active participants in their own learning experience. The students are forced to be "schooled" and to only receive knowledge from the expert in the room, without any questioning or exploration of ideas and without any true growth of the students' minds.

An important question to answer in order to successfully incorporate a theoretical framework of feminist engaged pedagogy theory into the classroom is, if traditional teaching is about power of the teacher, then what is engaged pedagogy? In order to answer that question, the first step is to define power and what it really is in the classroom. There is no way to eliminate the fact that teachers are the people at the end of the day who record the grades for students. Even library instructors are seen within this perspective by students in the classroom. Those aspects alone give teachers the power. However, power does not have to be just about a grade at the end of the year. Power can instead be about empowered students and rather than a hierarchal relationship between student and teacher, there can be a mutual learning relationship. In *Teaching to Transgress,* hooks explains this relationship as an empowerment for both teacher and student. She states, "Engaged pedagogy does not seek to simply empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process" (hooks 1994, 21). hooks and Freire advocate to teachers to share the power and use an engaged pedagogy—a model where the teacher is side-by-side with the student rather than a benevolent giver of knowledge (hooks 1994; Freire 2000). Using a feminist engaged pedagogy in the classroom means that instead "of the teacher serving as the ultimate authority on all knowledge and information, knowledge is collaboratively discussed and created by the students and the teacher together. The students are not passive vessels waiting to be filled by the teacher's wisdom" (Accardi 2013, 25). If the teacher does not choose to deny that traditional ideal of power and knowledge in the classroom, then he/she will be unable to see the students' needs fully and foster their understanding and participation in the classroom.

The idea of denying traditional ideals of power and giving it or sharing it with the students seems difficult to comprehend to some and a challenge to others (hooks 1994, 31). Additional theorists-turned-practitioners Rogers and Freiberg examine the challenge of power and trust in the classroom when using a person-centered learning model (an engaged pedagogy in itself). They state that the teacher "who considers using such as an approach must face up to the fearful aspects of sharing power and control. Who knows whether students or teachers can be trusted, whether a process can be trusted? One can only take the risk, and risk is frightening" (Rogers and Freiberg 1994, 214). Teachers using a traditional model where they are fully in control, and are leery of the idea of giving too much power to students, struggle with the idea of empowering students. Traditional methods of teaching do not put focus on student participation nor valuing student voices. The process of praxis in the classroom is most clearly achieved through authentic student participation. Freire explains the challenge of giving up freedom and authority as they "cannot be isolated, but must be considered in relationship to one another. Authentic authority is not affirmed as such by mere transfer of power, but through delegation or in sympathetic adherence" (Freire 2000, 179). Authenticity and delegation/sharing of authority in the classroom comes with respect for voice (both the students' and the teacher's) and active dialogue between people in class. In this way, the power in the classroom is shared.

Engaged Pedagogy vs. Traditional Teaching

In order to ensure that true critical feminist ideals are not being swallowed by patriarchy and diluted into mainstream "easier to digest" ideas, hooks urges scholars to critique and examine educational philosophy—and this includes critiquing other feminist scholars. Critiquing other theorists, even those in the same discipline is an important part of critically analyzing scholarship and theory. hooks questions feminist theorists for their lack of teaching feminist practice and theory "directed toward helping individuals integrate feminist thinking and practice into daily life" (hooks 1994, 70). The point here is that with any critical theory or pedagogy or philosophy, there is often a lack of discussion on *how* people can put these ideas into practice. With writings on engaged pedagogy, the same is often not true. Using critical feminist engaged pedagogy and following scholars such as hooks, Rogers and Freiberg, or Ladson-Billings to learn how to put these ideas into action in the classroom is a vital part of the process. The distinction between traditional teaching and engaged pedagogy that is built around the critical feminist ideals, which hooks advocates for, is one of the most important concepts in both educational theory and the field of librarianship.

Engaged pedagogy is the strongest educational theory *and practice* to foster students' successful education. By using a critical feminist engaged pedagogy, teachers are engaging themselves and students, as active participants in learning. As active participants in their own learning, students are enhancing their own critical thinking skills. In the discussion of how we can teach within a critical lens, Berry tells of her own education journey and her move to use both engaged pedagogy and critical race feminism in her classroom. She focuses on teachers moving to a place of resistance rather than the "safe" place of lecture, changing the power relationship between teacher and student through revealment in the classroom, intersectionality of identities, and seeing the complexities in ourselves and in others. As part of her use of critical race feminism, she highlights these ideas through counterstorytelling, exemplifying her statement that "engaged pedagogy from a critical race feminist perspective is, in fact, a counterstory" itself (Berry 2010, 25). The combination of ensuring intersectionality is included within the content of each academic discipline and what we are teaching our students to teach is an important aspect of critical feminist theory; it also is a method and a vital part of the fight against traditional, racist, and patriarchal ideals in education.

Critical feminist pedagogy then becomes the foundation for instruction—including library instruction—that promotes students to actively engage these skills in their lifelong learning. Accardi summarizes the goal of a critical feminist pedagogy in library instruction:

> [T]his is what makes feminist pedagogy different from learner-centered teaching: critical thinkers become critical actors and critical actors take the knowledge they have learned in the feminist classroom and translate it into everyday life and society and culture. They are aware of forms of oppression and act to end them . . . . they ask critical questions about where information comes from, about who decides what is knowledge and truth. (Accardi 2013, 57-58)

Incorporating engagement of research into the empowerment of students in the classroom, Ladenson describes feminist pedagogy as "an educational philosophy that offers a fresh and stimulating approach for motivating students and encouraging them to actively engage in the

research process" (Ladenson 2010, 105). This praxis in the instruction classroom is what will enhance students' learning experience, their critical thinking skills, and empowerment in their own learning.

Teaching with an engaged pedagogical framework can be time-consuming and challenging, but also a progressive and holistic teaching approach that has positively impacted the education system and more importantly, students. hooks encourages educators to remember that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" and the need to meet this challenge directly (hooks 1994, 12). Both credit-bearing course faculty, and library faculty, who understand the effect of this shift from traditional teaching pedagogy to critical pedagogical style will be able to study fully how students learn and enhance their critical thinking skills. Library instruction students who learn critical thinking and information literacy skills through an engaged and feminist pedagogical learning style will see those skills as an important part of lifelong learning and feel empowered to know that they are prepared to handle evaluation of their information needs. Engaged pedagogy in general, and even more so feminist engaged pedagogy, affect both students and teachers in their learning environments in a way to create a positive impact on society and on students' lives.

Within the field of librarianship, literature discussing teaching methods and pedagogy, much less critical pedagogy, has primarily been published only within the last few decades. For many years, librarians considered themselves more of a support resource or presenters rather than instructors. Librarians would show students or patrons different resources patrons could or should use. Then, librarians would be finished until they might help the patrons at the reference desk later in the semester. This is largely connected to the "concept of information literacy in the context of librarianship has been around since the 1970s. . . . but the idea of librarians teaching it rather than presenting it only since the 1980s" (Accardi 2013, 26). Librarians discussing and considering pedagogy at all is quite a recent development in the field. Literature that includes discussion of a critical pedagogy, such as feminist pedagogy, is even more recent. In fact, Accardi explains in the introduction to her book that one of her goals in her work is "to identify and fill a gap in the literature. To date, there is no book-length work or periodical article exploring the connections between library instruction and feminist pedagogy" (5). She summarizes two authors who in the last ten years published about integrating feminist teaching strategies in the library instruction classroom and integrating gender *and* information:

> Landenson describes methods of using feminist active and collaborative learning techniques to enhance and transform the library instruction classroom from a passive, lecture-based environment into an active, engaged, dynamic experience. Thus, bringing feminist pedagogy into the library instruction classroom promises to provide new ideas and directions for library instruction theory and practice. (Accardi 2013, 28)

The work being published in the field of librarianship regarding pedagogy, critical pedagogy, or even an engaged pedagogy is just beginning. Within the last decade, a theories and methods of critical library pedagogy book and a two-volume handbook including essays discussing critical library pedagogy have been published and include an array of topics—three chapters of which are included in this literature review (see Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier 2010; Pagowsky and McElroy 2016).

Engaged Critical Pedagogy in Library Instruction

In order to have an understanding of the change in library instruction, it is important to explain the different types of said instruction. For years, the traditional model of library instruction was called Bibliographic Instruction (BI) that "emphasize[s] a patriarchal paradigm, which involves the librarian dominating the classroom by lecturing to students about a plethora of information sources and search strategies" (Ladenson 2010, 105). In recent years, there has been a shift to information literacy instruction, a more active-learning based style of teaching. As not all readers are familiar with the different styles, it is important that a solid explanation be given. Although admittedly a long-quoted section, I include below Accardi's description and analysis of the differences between the two styles:

> I characterize bibliographic instruction (BI) as a more passive, tools-based approach that focuses on how to use a particular library resource without paying much attention to critical thinking or transferable skills. A BI session might take place in a non-networked classroom, with the instructor at the only computer, pointing and clicking through the library catalog or article database. Or the librarian instructor might roll in a cart full of print reference books to hold aloft and page through in front of the class. In an information literacy classroom, active learning is encouraged, and learning takes place in a networked classroom where each student has a computer. Rather than relying heavily on passive demonstration, which is more typical of BI, an information literacy instruction session provides space for students to learn in a collaborative, hands-on manner. And rather than focusing on how to use a particular tool, the focus is on critical thinking skills and how they can be deployed across any library platform, no matter what the interface. (Accardi 2013, 58-59)

The shift to information literacy instruction is first of all, not widespread throughout all universities (Ragains 2013, 24). Many librarians are still teaching BI sessions due to the requests from faculty not changing: faculty still want the standard one-shot library session where the librarian is only given one chance to work with the students (13). Second, information literacy instruction does not automatically guarantee an engaged pedagogical style or one that is taught through a critical feminist lens. These aspects are the next level librarians need to strive for and these aspects are also the most difficult for librarians to incorporate into their teaching.

Connected to the struggle of incorporating a feminist lens into a one-shot library instruction session is a challenge that all engaged pedagogical teachers face in the classroom: the students only want to learn in the traditional lecture teaching style. Accardi concedes that at times, it does seem like it would be easier to use the BI model and not create a dynamic classroom where the students may feel forced into student participation; however, as she explains, "just because it is easier does not mean that it is the most effective technique for producing and facilitating student learning" (Accardi 2013, 48). Teaching with an engaged critical feminist pedagogy is challenging but librarians need to be dedicated to confronting those challenges and focus on the successful engaged instruction sessions.

Librarians are beginning to write more and discuss with each other specific models and methods to incorporate engaged active learning in library classrooms. In fact, the recently published

Critical Library Pedagogy two-volume handbook includes both theoretical chapters, workbook activities, and lesson plans for librarians to use in their own classrooms that the authors have successfully (or not, in some cases) implemented into their own classes (Pagowski and McElroy 2016). Building upon Freire's own popular education idea of analyzing one's situation and then acting to create social conditions, Garcia describes a four-step popular education process that engages student participation and can be implemented into library instruction (Garcia 2016, 96). The process includes finding an issue, analyzing it, acting upon potential solutions, and then reflecting upon the action taken. These four steps would be too time-consuming and intensive for librarians' typical one-shot library sessions where they are with the students for only a brief time. However, it is possible to include this engaged style of teaching by using the first two steps, identifying and analyzing an issue, as part of an activity where students discover research topics and search terms. Garcia explains:

> The focus on identifying and analyzing an issue can lay the groundwork for the student's engagement with taking action and reflection on actions taken. Acting on potential solutions and reflecting on actions taken would involve multiple sessions. Again, this highlights the limitations of incorporating popular education concepts in a one-shot library instruction session. (97)

For further ideas and creation of outcomes to build an instruction session based on feminist pedagogy, Accardi includes in her book a table that cross lists specific feminist teaching strategies with specific feminist instruction librarian teaching strategies. For example, she converts the feminist teacher strategy "emphasizes hands-on or interactive learning, field trips, service or community learning" into the feminist instruction librarian strategy "employs hands-on learning activities that require students to engage with library research tools" (Accardi 2013, 50). These strategies were published by Accardi only within the last three years so at this point, librarians are using and practicing them currently but not yet publishing on their success in the classroom.

Critical Thinking Skills, Information Literacy, and Lifelong Learning

The connection between critical thinking skills and lifelong learning is a strong ideal taught by information literacy instruction librarians. Teaching critical information literacy is teaching lifelong learning and critical thinking. However, the importance of critical thinking skills is even stronger for those teaching critical information literacy skills through a feminist lens. Using a feminist pedagogical style teaches students how to be lifelong critical thinkers and learners—this can be challenging when in order to teach how to critically evaluate information, librarians must first teach students to think in a more dynamic way than they may have in the past. Galoozis and Pinto describe the challenge as "from a critical information literacy perspective, in order for students to engage with ambiguity when seeking and evaluating information, they first need to see themselves as more than passive consumers and their education as more than a form of currency" (Galoozis and Pinto 2016, 165). They additionally explain that critical information literacy situates "students as critical thinkers, guided to learning not with modules of marketable skills, but through self-directed inquiry and developing a tolerance for ambiguity" (161). Teaching students critical information literacy skills leads to students becoming critical thinkers and lifelong learners. If librarian instructors are able to work past the challenges, the impact of

these students entering the larger society will clearly be seen as they will now be active members who are able to make informed decisions. Or, as Accardi states, "critical thinkers [who] then become critical actors" and push for change in society (Accardi 2013, 57).

Teaching Critical Information Literacy as a Political Act

Connected to the idea of teaching students to be lifelong critical thinkers and then using those skills to act in the society, is the idea of the library instruction as a political force. Teaching using a critical pedagogical framework is political as it is; teaching with it in library instruction is both radical and at the same time, directly obvious. First, Keer clearly defines the difference between teachers using critical pedagogical framework and those who do not:

> Critical pedagogy is not just another approach to teaching, like active or team-based learning. It is a radical reconceptualization of the roles of both teacher and student in the creation of knowledge. Adopting critical pedagogy requires an acknowledgement that teaching is a political act. Teachers are not and can never be neutral or benign actors within education, and education is not a natural phenomenon but rather a process of enculturation that traditionally upholds an unequal social order. (Keer 2016, 67)

Carrying this idea of teaching as a political act, Accardi discusses her frustration with the national librarianship organization, the Association for College Research Libraries, and its continued promotion of "the idea that information literacy is some neutral, apolitical concept that exists outside of the culture and paradigm that produced it . . . is problematic to me. Of *course* information literacy is and should be politicized. So should the classroom, the library, and its institution" (Accardi 2013, 66). When examining how teaching information literacy is political and how only recently the governing bodies of academic librarianship are moving towards a positive change, Keer admits that at this point, it is not enough to actually promote critical pedagogical teaching. Using the *ACRL Information Literacy Framework* as a reference, and how it stresses problem posing and exploration-based learning, she identifies the "trope that objectivity and neutrality are hallmarks of the library profession persists and is incompatible with critical approach to information" (Keer 2016, 68). Critical information literacy instruction, critical pedagogy, teaching through a feminist lens, etc., are all avenues that support library instruction as a political act. At this time, it is not a wholly prevalent ideal in librarianship as evidenced by the continued claiming that librarianship is neutral by some librarians in leadership positions (69).

Teaching Critical Information Literacy through Critical Feminist Engaged Pedagogy

The above discussion of critical theories of race, feminism, library pedagogy, and information literacy leads to a conversation about the challenges to teaching critical information literacy through this critical feminist engaged pedagogical framework. As critical library pedagogy itself is only a recent shift in the field of librarianship, there are still many issues that librarians confront. Two general challenges that almost every librarian instructor meets are explained here. Mentioned previously a number of times, one of the hardest challenges to teaching through a feminist lens is the one-shot instruction session obstacle. Accardi describes this challenge:

> And given that many instruction programs deliver instruction only in one-shot sessions, where serious relationship-building with students is nearly impossible, and where time constraints and the demands of learning outcomes often render it impractical to employ any creativity, imagination, or care in instructional approaches, the very structure and system upon which most library instruction programs are based almost sabotage feminist efforts from the start. (Accardi 2013, 69)

There are ways to overcome this obstacle; however, a couple were discussed previously. In addition, it is important not to be overwhelmed and have the "no" responses from faculty discourage continued efforts to make the changes. An additional challenge is that the librarian instructor is *not* the actual teacher of the students they are teaching—they are not the faculty assigning grades nor teacher of record. Therefore, "their ability to incorporate critical pedagogy into information literacy work is also largely contingent on the receptivity of the faculty members they collaborate with. Even if the librarian is fully invested in critical pedagogy, the classroom faculty may need to be convinced" (Keer 2016, 70). Working with the teachers of record to create instruction built upon a feminist, engaged pedagogy is not always easy and depending on their view of critical pedagogy in general, the teachers may be a complete obstacle for librarians. In this case, librarian instructors can use the method mentioned previously where at least the search term examples they use in class can be feminist based and critically chosen. Connected to the challenge of collaboration with faculty to incorporate critical information literacy into courses is that we must also convince the *students* to change their practices. Swanson states this challenge "lies with convincing our students by shifting the focus of critical pedagogy toward student belief about knowledge and worldview" (Swanson 2010, 266).

Overall, it is not a simple nor easy task to use critical feminist and engaged pedagogy in a library instruction classroom. In fact, at times it may seem overwhelming. Keer gives the following thought regarding this daunting task:

> Since the larger project of rehabilitating democracy or reducing the neoliberal influence on higher education is outside of the scope of the average librarian's responsibilities, critical librarians will continue to encounter these and other philosophical and practical tensions as they endeavor to develop their praxis. (Keer 2016, 71)

Though not an optimistic outlook, Keer reminds librarian instructors of the challenges they will face in their political act of using engaged pedagogy in their classrooms, a critical feminist pedagogy that will provide opportunities for students to become critical thinkers, critical actors, lifelong learners, and people who are empowered to evaluate information. In other words, the challenge is worth it.

Moving Forward

Incorporating a feminist, engaged pedagogy into library instruction sessions can be challenging for librarians. Librarians are limited to only the power that the credit-bearing faculty member—and the power the students *in* the class—give them. Some librarians are able to work with faculty to be embedded into courses, teaching students for multiple sessions in one semester, or can co-create the course research assignments, ensuring that a critical feminist lens is being utilized.

However, most librarians are still forced to teach the one-shot library instruction sessions for most of the semester. In these cases, librarians have specific information literacy objectives to meet during their brief time with students. This is not to say that librarians cannot use feminist engaged pedagogy while teaching these sessions. Accardi explains that "just because my primary objectives in the classroom are information literacy learning outcomes does not mean that I cannot achieve these outcomes through a feminist lens. For instance, I might choose feminist-themed, gender-related, or women-centered examples in database searching demonstrations" (Accardi 2013, 37).

Future work and research, including my own, focusing on feminist engaged pedagogy within library instruction will need to acknowledge that this method is not a new idea. Librarians may only recently be teaching more frequently with active learning, engaged pedagogy, critical information literacy, and focusing lifelong learning—but feminists, teachers-as-activists in the classroom, and radical librarians have been making waves and empowering students for decades. As a feminist researcher, librarian, and scholar, I am confident that my teaching with feminist engaged pedagogy and its impact on students will continue the path of library instruction transforming into a lifelong learning experience for our students.

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